

SAM GILLIAM



“Unless you have this kind of freedom in the materials or the way you make art, by some standards, you may not be an artist.” —Sam Gilliam

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Sam Gilliam has been acclaimed as one of the most important and inventive colorists of the last thirty years. Born in Tupelo, Mississippi, he earned a Masters of Art at the University of Louisville in 1961. The following year, Gilliam moved to Washington, D.C., to join the second generation of Washington Color Painters and Abstract Expressionists. He became interested in the qualities of color and excited by the new artistic frontiers these artists were voyaging.

Since the mid-1960s, he has been a pioneer of nontraditional painting. In one work, he raked huge quantities of acrylic paint and gel across a large canvas, cut the canvases into fairly regular geometric shapes—triangles and rectangles, wedges and arcs—and then stitched parts together in an improvisational way, almost like a crazy quilt. Some monumental canvases are draped on floors or walls or suspended from the ceiling for final presentation. He took the paint beyond the canvas, creating billowing fields of color and three-dimensional pieces that entice the viewer to become lost in the painting itself. Since 1965, Gilliam has mounted more than twenty solo exhibitions of his work at museums around the world. He is included in many prestigious museum permanent collections and has been commissioned to create sculptural paintings for many public spaces and private collections.

ABOUT THE ART

Sam Gilliam’s paintings have always strained against their boundaries, their edges, and their surfaces. Inspired by the colored works of Morris Louis and the

VOCABULARY

balance
central axis
symmetry
radial balance
formal/informal balance
rhythm

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innovative painting techniques of Jackson Pollock, Gilliam began working with huge lengths of canvas spread on the floor from wall to wall. His technique included pouring, spilling, and raking acrylic paints on the canvas, saturating the canvases with paint in a gestural fashion, and folding over his canvases and staining forms, all in a spontaneous process. He displayed an immense vitality with his new experimental mode. His colors seethed onto the canvas, and his ability to control large formats was impressive. His works have a raw, fluid quality, with colors bleeding into one another and thick overlays of conflicting and complimentary patterns.

It soon became apparent to Gilliam that, having freed himself from the quadrilateral plane of traditional painting, he could remove the next barrier and move at will into three-dimensional space. He brought his billowing images off the wall by draping them around the gallery or suspending them from the ceiling.

In 1970, Gilliam began to make wall-bound, "draped" paintings. These works launched his career and made him an internationally recognized artist. The introduction of an unsupported canvas stands as a unique innovation that has influenced other artists greatly. The work became part painting, part sculpture, and allowed Gilliam to achieve a lyrical quality inherent in large, draped fabric. *Arch* demonstrates Gilliam's success in combining vibrant color, an active gestural painting style, and draped canvas.

MUSEUM CONNECTIONS

Look at other abstract works in the Cincinnati Art Museum's permanent collection: *Rock Pond* by Helen Frankenthaler, *Towards Crepuscule* by Hans Hoffman, *Horizontal Rust* by Franz Kline, and *Brown, Orange, Blue on Maroon* by Mark Rothko. Compare and contrast the lines, shapes, and color in these works with Sam Gilliam's *Arch*.

CRITICAL THINKING

The concept of artwork being abstract is one that may be new and a little more difficult for students to understand. Discuss with the students using the following questions looking for connections between the artwork and personal experiences, ideas, and feelings.

What kinds of lines or shapes do you see in *Arch*?

Do you see those lines/shapes repeated in the artwork? What colors do you see? Which colors are repeated the most? What feelings do you think the artist was trying to convey by repeating these certain lines, shapes, and colors? Discussion would be assisted by making a list of the students' answers and then referring to them during discussion.

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

SCIENCE

Incorporating natural dyes into this project can be an educational and exciting transdisciplinary discovery process. Natural dyes are materials found in nature and have the capacity to impart color to fiber through a chemical process.

CONTENT

Beautiful colors can be obtained by dyeing with natural dyes. Dye material can be gathered from the natural world around you. Student will begin to understand what makes a dye, gather dye material, hypothesize about the color it will yield, and test these ideas by making their own dye.

MATERIALS

natural dye ingredients: berries, turmeric powder, apple tree bark, onion skins, black walnut shells, carrots, paprika, spinach, and alum mordant. (see dyeing instructions for exact amounts)

mordant: Alum (used most frequently), Chrome, Iron

water: Distilled water is best, but tap water can be used and is more practical and economical.

large plastic bins	hot water	grinding utensils	measuring spoons
strainer	rubber Gloves	litmus paper	

PROCEDURE

1. Create natural dyes. Each dye has their own “recipe”. All of the suggested items listed above can be mixed with one tablespoon of alum in a gallon of hot water to yield a color. Allow dye to soak for at least twenty-four hours in the sun to yield the strongest color.
2. Test hypothesis using lab chart and Ph paper (litmus sheet).

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What in these dye materials causes a color reaction? Why does the insect of the species *Dactylopius Coccus* yield a violet fit for royalty?
2. Why are mordants necessary? Why does chrome enhance the warm colors of dye?

SOCIAL STUDIES

Natural dyes were at one point pivotal trade items. The European exploration of the Americas yielded even more precious dyeing materials, mainly shades of red and violet. Study the trade routes and how discoveries of different colors affected the economy of each region.

LANGUAGE ARTS

Write a poem or paragraph to express the feelings expressed in Sam Gilliam’s Arch.

Discuss the feeling or mood expressed in this artwork. Can you find an example in literature that expresses a similar mood or feeling?

MATHEMATICS

Discuss the concept of an arch. What degrees are the angles of this artwork?

MUSIC

Jazz strongly influenced Sam Gilliam, but not just the music, the musicians and their approach to creating music also.



Sam Gilliam, *Arch*, 1971, Museum Purchase with the aid of funds from the CAM Women's Committee, Pogue's, and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1975.3

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Cover detail:

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